NATHAN'S HOWL

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by Alba Pratalia

Nathan saw the best minds of his generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
scrolling themselves through the glow of cracked iPhones at dawn looking for a wireless fix,
AI-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the server-farm dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty-wage and hoodie-clad and hollow-eyed and high sat up vaping in the algorithmic darkness of Airbnb basements floating across the tops of cities doomscrolling TikToks,
who bared their brains to Heaven under LED streetlamps and saw crypto-angels staggering on co-working roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with debt-scarred eyes hallucinating midterms and OnlyFans stardom,
who FaceTimed their souls into the void and left voice notes like psalms nobody opened.

And then Nathan, on his usual morning stroll at 7:48 to the liquor store, saw her again and she was still a bitch. Same bitch as 25 years ago, same bitch now. Apparently she had not been swallowed by the deepest pit of hell as Nathan had wished her, did not have a bleeding asshole with all the insects of the Amazon basin infesting it, and her arms were not too short to cover it. Apparently they let her roam freely across the countryside, unchecked, untagged, unsupervised, as if no harm could come from casual contact with the **Psychoshit™**—the industrial-

strength plague in human form, the one they should've bagged, tagged, and shelved in some refrigerated drawer decades ago.

Nathan didn't break stride. He knew how this game worked: lock eyes and you risk eternal damnation in conversational small talk, dodge too hard and she'll sniff the avoidance like a truffle pig of malice. He went for the middle road: the "polite bastard's walk," head angled ten degrees off, like he was studying the liquor store's neon sign two blocks away.

But of course she saw him. Of course she smiled that same bitch-smile that said *I know what you did in 2000 and I'm still billing you for it emotionally.*

Nathan thought: *Christ, this is what ruins mornings. Not global warming, not AI displacing jobs, not even the price of whiskey. Just this creature, loitering through history like an unpaid utility bill.*

And then yes, yes, YES! It happened. She was crossing the street, thumbs busy revising some godforsaken Facebook rant nobody had asked for, when—
HOOOOONK—BANG—SPLATTT.

A truck hit her.

It was like a cartoon: literally knocked out of her shoes. Feet and half of shins just… lingered, stubbornly planted on the asphalt like they hadn't gotten the memo. Head and arms went airborne, tossed skyward like random basketballs at a playground where God had lost his aim.

But the center body? Ah, the center body. No grand finale, no noble collapse—just **sudden jelly**, splattered in all directions, like a blender with no lid. Or better yet: like a tractor with a manure spreader, flinging out decades of malice in neat, even arcs. Yes, this was the apt similitude. A manure spreader, finally broadcasting the true essence of the Psychoshit™ to the open air.

Nathan felt a tear roll down his cheek. It was beautiful.
So beautiful.

Not justice. Not revenge. Not karma.
Just… **physics.**

The universe, in its infinite indifference, had finally done something right.

The last but one time they had met, he owed her a present but forgot, so he G-spot fingered her instead—two fingers and a fuck-you, Nathan's usual brand of improvisation. She came convulsing, spasming, squirting, the whole body-as-a-seismograph routine. Later she called him *"the god of sex"* (capital letters implied, self-conferred sainthood vibes) and insisted on retribution. Her idea of repayment? A wank.

So she wanked him on a hill overlooking the sea, night coast lights flickering like Christmas for alcoholics. He came screaming—an operatic howl pitched somewhere between primal agony and tenor audition. She kissed him after, not for love, not for tenderness, but because she liked the scream. She admitted it: the sound of him

detonating was better than any symphony. And this, mind you, after they hadn't even been dating for three years.

But the last time they had been together? Different. The psycho switch flipped to full power. Shit-psycho, no filter, no rescue. The kind of encounter where you walk out feeling like you just tongued a live socket. And that was the final straw. They never spoke again.

Nathan entered the happiest period of his life since.

Years later, Nathan—living on the other side of the world, happy, unbothered, his past native land dissolved into irrelevance—still got ambushed with news. Friends, acquaintances, old parasites with too much memory and too little sense, dropping updates like bad weather reports: *"I met her here." "She published this online." "She did this there and there."*

Nathan's replies were always the same, automatic reflex, the comedy of cruelty turned liturgy:
"Was there smell of sulphur?"
"Was she burning in a pit of flames?"

And when the answer was no—as it always, damnably was—he would snap the conversation shut. Change the subject, or just end it mid-sentence, like hanging up on a telemarketer.

Because for Nathan, the only interesting update about the Psychoshit™ was the obituary. And until then, silence was bliss.

Life can be dignified or sordid. And when you eventually live a dignified life, you can let the previous sordid flush down the drain of a previousness that deserves no nostalgia. It can be forgotten, discarded, abandoned like old bedsheets—filthy beyond the mercy of laundry, too stained for detergent, too incriminated for second chances. Sheets like that don't get washed. They get burned.

Nathan knew this.
And with every year of silence, every update dodged, every ghost exorcised, the flame kept crackling.

So, anyway, the truck had struck her. And that reminded him of that wise man's last words: *"Oh, a truck…"* A final epitaph worth chiseling in granite.

So, with a smile larger than municipal codes permitted on any human face, Nathan swung open the first bar's door and walked in like a man anointed. He ordered three large beers. No hesitation, no polite chit-chat—just three beers, aligned like soldiers.

He downed them in sequence, stopwatch in his head. The third one went dry at **42 seconds and three-eighths**—*IOC verification pending.* He slammed the glass down as if auditioning for Olympic drinking.

Then came the encore: three whiskies, three brandies, all at once, like a religious offering to his own liver.

The barman—no fool, but no philosopher either—paused, wiped his hands on a rag, and asked for Nathan's phone number. Then, with a solemn nod, saved it in his contacts as **"BFF 4ever."**

The world had been set right.

After his proper imbibition during the morning hours, Nathan knew that society had a script for him. The role of the troublesome drunk: stagger, slur, abuse the patrons, maybe posture into some half-assed fight that would never be fought anyway.

But Nathan managed to be none of that—for the simple reason that he was too happy. His blood buzzed not with bitterness, but with pure effervescence, like champagne poured into a barrel of whiskey.

So instead of snarls or fists, what bubbled out of him were taunts stolen straight from the holy scriptures of comedy. To the men at the counter he declared: *"I fart in your general direction!"* To the woman nursing a shandy in the corner: *"Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelt of elderberries!"*

And when some patron left—not by eviction, but by their own sober choice—Nathan threw back his head and howled: *"Better off you go! Or I shall taunt you a second time!"*

The bar roared. Half in laughter, half in confusion. Nathan didn't care. He was buoyed on ale and afterlife justice, the only man in the room who knew the world had finally corrected itself with one sacred splat.

If you watch Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, at the final scene you realize something. Billy is in bed with Maria—Rita Coolidge, immortally sensual, beyond sexy, the kind of woman whose naked shoulder alone could erase the memory of your own name. They're making love, slow and certain, while Garrett's posse closes in.

And here's the revelation: when you're brain-wired on her naked body, when your heart is pounding up your throat and every nerve ending is screaming hard and willing, you forget the world outside is still happening. Taxes, enemies, mortality—none of it exists in the frame. There is only skin, only breath, only the soft slam of flesh on fate.

Then Garrett arrives. He hears them in bed, knows what's happening, and before killing Billy he just sits on the porch swing. He lets him have the last one. No dialogue, no sermon. Just the rustle of night, the rhythm of love, the ticking countdown of doom.

If you don't get those last fifteen minutes—if you don't feel them in your bones, without words—you never truly lived.

Nathan was thinking about Peckinpah's scene because on the radio came *Billy the Kid* himself—Kris Kristofferson—singing *Me and Bobby McGee.* The very song the Psychoshit™ used to think was by Janis Joplin, as if Janis had written it in some hippie shack between joints and hallucinations. Nathan smirked. Even her musical knowledge had been wrong.

Except it wasn't even a radio—it was Spotify, piped from the Uber driving him home. The bar crowd had orchestrated it, with the precision

of a military evacuation. They tipped three figures and gave the driver precise instructions:

1. Walk him to his place.
2. Make him open his own door.
3. Make sure he takes his clothes off.
4. Tuck him in bed.
5. Flee.

Problem: the Uber driver was a lady.

And the Nathan-drunk version—inebriated, euphoric, quoting Peckinpah and half the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*—insisted on inviting her in for a drink. He recited Auden. He tried some Cummings. He went full metaphysical and told her that *"the voice of her eyes was deeper than all the roses."*

Result: his friend had to cough up another three-figure tip, just to keep her from pressing charges.

The gospel according to Nathan: poetry costs.

Nathan was not new to that kind of boutades. He had a file—if not with the police, then with Fate itself. Like that night when he paid by card. Contactless didn't work. The waitress, professional and patient, tried the chip. It worked. Transaction approved. She smiled, tossed off the casual remark: *"We just needed to slip it in."*

Any sane man would have nodded, signed the receipt, and shut the fuck up. But not Nathan. Oh no. His inner saboteur had been waiting for

this line for years. The words flew out like champagne from a shaken bottle:

"It's always better to slip it in."

Silence. Long, thick, courtroom silence.

Nathan, suddenly aware of gravity, mortality, and the speed of police response times, smiled. He grabbed his coat. He bolted. A man fleeing a crime scene of his own punchline.

Sometimes the joke pays for itself. Sometimes it costs you bail.

Nathan woke up later that afternoon with the usual anguish. Depression, heartache, the whole choir of invisible hammers pounding his ribs. Not from booze—no, never from booze. The physical hangover was zero. **None whatsoever.** That's what years of training leads to: perfection. The body adapted, metabolized, evolved like a reptile in the desert.

But the moral hangover? That's a different beast. Waking up after a day-sleep, blinds half-closed, daylight stabbing through anyway—always feels like punishment. Maybe it's the broken circadian cycles, maybe it's the body's quiet reminder that *"you are not supposed to exist like this"*, or maybe it's just sheer cruelty of life.

So, Nathan got up. Stretched. Swore. Then reached for his kit, the holy trinity of recovery:

- **Clotiazepam.**

- Vodka.
- Lime.

Horse-weight doses. Enough to tranquilize a cavalry charge.

This was not "taking the edge off." This was ritual. Alchemy. Reset button for the soul.

And then the usual refrain kicked in.
Life's a piece of shit / When you look at it / Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true / You'll see it's all a show / Keep 'em laughin' as you go / Just remember that the last laugh is on you.

Not sung, not whistled. Nothing merry about it. None of the jaunty chorus lines from *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.* No. This was different. This was *Ding Dong the Witch is Dead* on repeat, dystopian, off-key, a needle locked in the groove with no off switch.

It wasn't irony anymore—it was mantra. Nathan's skull echoed with it, not as music but as system error. The refrain was his tinnitus, his personal siren song, his laughing gas hallucination.

Life as farce. Death as punchline. Existence as a loop with a broken stop button.

Maybe it was just another word for nothing else to lose. Maybe it was self-destruction dressed in karaoke philosophy. But Nathan was enjoying it—insulting every living, dead, and not-yet-born thing. Spraying contempt like a lawn sprinkler on a July afternoon.

He knew exactly what he was doing: baiting the void. Hoping for the casual bullet of a hater, some amateur marksman scrolling through rage who'd decide, *why not, today's the day to splatter Nathan Rawls across the pavement.* Boom. Brain on the sidewalk, body checked out, bye-bye.

A one-shot cleaning service for the next guest of life.

And Nathan laughed. Because if that wasn't dignity, what the hell was?

Nathan, lunchless and still orbiting that moral hangover, raided the fridge with the precision of a man who'd learned to treat food like a dare. He arranged cheeses and cold cuts on a plate as if composing a map of bad decisions: crumbly cheddar, something suspiciously labeled "salami" that had seen three winters, a wedge of camembert too proud to admit defeat. He salted nothing. He crowned every slice with showers of Tabasco until the kitchen looked like a crime scene in a spicy movie. Two thick slices of bread accepted the sacrament.

He ate it standing, chewing like a man who'd forgotten the point of meals, chasing each incendiary mouthful with ice-cold vodka straight from the freezer. The vodka bit the back of his throat awake; the Tabasco did the rest. It was rancid, perfect, sacramental.

When the plate was licked clean—because habits die harder than promises—he dialed the friend who'd twice paid three-figure tips to keep drivers emotionally intact. The phone rang.

"Come and get me," Nathan said when the friend answered. No preamble. No apology. "I'm your responsibility now."

His friend, who understood what “responsibility” meant in Nathan-speak (a euphemism involving bail bonds, ambulance rides, or long, expensive coffee), didn’t argue. He grabbed his keys and came.

Ten minutes later Nathan was half-leaning in the passenger seat, windows down to the city’s indifferent air. His friend drove like someone who’d learned to steer around disasters: calm, practiced, and a little tired. Nathan watched the blur of storefronts slide by and thought, briefly and deliciously, about patience on moons and trucks with manure spreaders.

“Where to?” the friend asked.

“Anywhere,” Nathan said. “But make it a road that ends with a bar.”

The friend obliged. They left the apartment, and Chapter Two breathed, impatient, at the threshold.

At the bar Nathan had fun. The kind of fun that only comes when the first vodka of the afternoon shakes hands with the sixth beer of the day.

A stranger leaned over, squinting at Nathan’s friend.
“Are you…”

“Beg your pardon?” the friend said, polite, cautious, already regretting sitting next to Nathan in public.

“Oh no, my impression,” the stranger waved. “You just look like someone famous…”

The friend gave a small smile, the *please let this conversation evaporate* smile.

And that's when Nathan detonated. He slapped the bar with both palms and bellowed, "HEY, PAL! WHERE YOU GOING? IT'S HIM! IT'S HIM ALL RIGHT!"

The stranger blinked. The bartender froze mid-pour.

Nathan's grin widened. He jabbed a finger at his friend, the poor bastard. "Ladies and gentlemen, you are in the presence of greatness! The son of a woman who sells her body for money! The very man himself!"

The bar half-laughed, half-gasped. The stranger looked thrilled, as if he'd stumbled into TMZ live. The friend muttered something about needing the bathroom and seriously considered never coming back.

Nathan raised his glass in a toast to chaos.

Nathan's friend half cursed, half smiled. He knew Nathan. He loved Nathan. He loved him beyond this kind of bullshit. So instead of protesting, instead of denying, he leaned into it. He admitted who he was, whoever that might be, and kindly began signing autographs. Napkins, coasters, receipts, one woman's cleavage. He posed for selfies, chin tilted just so, eyes carrying the glow of a man who knew this was ridiculous but decided to play along anyway.

What he didn't notice was Nathan.

Nathan, perched two stools down, had transformed into a one-man ticket office. He had scrawled "Meet & Greet" on a bar napkin and taped it to a stool. He was charging seventy-five bucks a head for the privilege of stepping into the aura of his suddenly famous friend. No reason, no backstory, no justification. Just **$75 a ticket, cash only.**

And people paid. Oh, how they paid. A line formed, curving past the jukebox, patrons fumbling bills with the wild-eyed excitement of converts at a revival. Nathan pocketed the cash with solemn dignity, as if ordained by the Bureau of Fame.

His friend kept signing, oblivious, smiling, snapping photos, whispering "bless you" like a saint on tour.

Nathan clinked his glass against the till of folded bills and thought: *this is dignity, this is progress, this is art.*

Both Nathan and his friend were tired. Everything ached in the body—shoulders, knees, the weird parts between ribs where life hides its knives. It was tomorrow morning for everyone else in the tavern, but for them it was still last night, stretched like chewing gum past its limits.

Yet they kept the game alive. Because what little money trickled in from this ridiculous show—autographs, selfies, Nathan's seventy-five-dollar meet-and-greet scam—wouldn't stay in their pockets. It would drift into the tavern owner's hands, maybe find its way to the local drinking friends who'd run tabs longer than their memories, maybe even help a widow down the street cover her bills. Hell, it might pay off some fines owed by neighbors who couldn't afford another brush with the law.

So they happily played the comedy, knowing it wasn't for them but for the ecosystem of survival that thrives around bars.

And when the last selfie was snapped, the last autograph smeared, and the tavern floor finally swept of cigarette butts and laughter, they looked at each other with the clarity only exhaustion can bring.

Next step: next bar. More booze.

Because the comedy doesn't end—it just changes venues.

Nathan hooked his friend's arm into his own, the sway of two drunks pretending it was choreography. He tilted his head back, eyes half-closed, and crooned into the streetlight air:

"The night is young, the skies are clear, and if you want to go walkin', dear, it's delightful, it's delicious, it's de-lovely."

The friend chuckled, rolled with it, and answered in kind, slipping into the duet like he'd been waiting all night:

"I understand the reason why you're sentimental, 'cause so am I, it's delightful, it's delicious, it's de-lovely."

The drunks on the corner applauded, mistaking it for busking. A stray dog barked on rhythm. The bar crawl was officially christened, and it was going to be a long one.

They staggered forward arm in arm, Cole Porter their compass, the next neon sign their North Star. The night wasn't promising sobriety, but it was promising spectacle. And Nathan, as ever, was ready to sell tickets.

Friend: *"Where to?"*

Nathan raised a finger like a conductor and belted out, wobbling on the curb:
"If you're blue, and you don't know where to go to,
Why don't you go where lotta booze sits?
Losing all our wits—"

The friend couldn't resist. He joined in, slurring into the duet, snapping his fingers in the wrong places:
"Puttin' on the blitz!"

They both howled with laughter, stumbling arm in arm, their footsteps turning sidewalk cracks into sheet music. The people watching didn't see drunks—they saw two lunatics staging a street musical with zero budget and infinite conviction.

And just like that, the direction was clear: *wherever the next bar was, that's where the show must go on.*

Nathan slapped his hand on the bar, nearly knocking over an ashtray that hadn't been used since 1987.

"Innkeeper! Publican! Bartender! Plenty of intoxicating beverages, if you please!"

His voice cracked across the room like an operatic summons. The jukebox sputtered into silence, the dart players froze mid-throw, and even the neon beer sign flickered nervously.

The barman gave them a look—a cocktail itself, equal parts *ca-ching* (two good spending patrons, heavy hitters, big tips incoming) and *facepalm* (troublesome, loud, liability with legs). The *ca-ching* prevailed.

He straightened his vest that didn't exist, polished a glass that didn't need polishing, and moved toward them with the steady glide of a man pretending to be above it all. And when he finally leaned on the counter, his smile had the eerie composure of Lloyd in *The Shining*—calm, deferential, but with eyes that already knew how this night would end.

"Gentlemen," he said smoothly, "what'll it be?"

Nathan leaned forward, pupils like searchlights.
"Everything."

Nathan insisted Lloyd—Lloyd, because names make mischief simple—that Lloyd pour a drink for himself too.
Lloyd obliged the ritual with the practiced face of a man who's been paid to pretend for years. He took a clean glass, measured an invisible measure, raised the bottle like a chalice, and poured. Everyone knew the choreography: Lloyd would fake the sip, tilt his head, close his eyes in bliss, and then, with the delicacy of a stage magician, tip the rest down the sink. Theater is theater and deception is part of the service. Nathan loved that part.

They cheered and clicked their glasses the way soldiers click helmets after a successful raid. Plastic cups, crystal tumblers, a chipped pint glass with a personality disorder—no vessel refused. Down went the faux ambrosia. Lloyd mouthed the pantomime of intoxication so well you'd swear he'd been drinking since adolescence. He smiled a smile market-tested for sincerity and dignity and then, as if ashamed of his own honesty, poured the surplus into the sink with a clink that sounded like applause.

Nathan slapped the bar again, because habit and drama are siblings, and ordered more. The order bled into another—then another—then some more, like a tax on good sense. The bar answered with liquid. Bottles uncorked, limes were assaulted, ice clattered like festival percussion. The room thickened with breath and laughter and the soft, communal violence of people choosing oblivion for the evening.

At some point—because time loses its business hours in such places—Nathan laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. The hand trembled with the polite tremor of someone who's been both a sinner and a saint and prefers the in-between. He looked at the friend, at Lloyd pretending, at the assembled congregation of drunks and late-shift saints, and he offered a benediction precise as a bullet and soft as a hymn:

"May God grant us all, all of us drinkers, a good and easy death."

Nobody argued. Someone raised a glass and offered a half-sob laugh that sounded like an amen. Lloyd pretended to bow. The jukebox coughed up a song, off-key and majestic, and the neon sign hummed as if in agreement. Conversation slurred into confessions and then back

into jokes; a man at the end of the bar recited a line from a play he misremembered, and a woman clapped because applause is always the right response.

They kept drinking because that's what evenings do when they find a pair of willing hearts: they expand. The world outside—polite, punctual, outrageously normal—muttered along, but here the gravity had been loosened. Laughter took more space than thought. The city's noises filtered in like distant applause.

Nathan's eyes grew soft, not sad so much as luminous with the particular satisfaction of mischief that has finally paid its rent. The toast had landed. The theater had closed its curtain for now. Glasses emptied and refilled. Lloyd tiptoed back to the sink and made the discreet motions of a man washing away what he never owned.

And then the world faded to drunk. The end.